



AFGHANISTAN: THE END OF A STRATEGIC DISTRACTION



By Sven Biscop (<https://www.egmontinstitute.be/expert-author/sven-biscop/>) (20 August 2021)

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But occupying and taking over Afghanistan was what the US did, eventually calling on NATO and other allies for assistance in what became a state-building project. After twenty years, that add-on objective ended in total failure.

(Photo credit: West point)

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Great Power Politics

That failure represents an enormous loss of face for the US, and to a lesser extent for NATO, which was but the conduit for the implementation of an American strategy that the European allies never really tried to influence. Face matters in international politics. Those who stand for a different way of life have been quick to paint this as a sign of American and Western weakness, and to play up the supposed strength of their own model.

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The reality is that failure in Afghanistan says little or nothing about the relative strength of today's great powers: the US, China, Russia, and the EU. Indeed, the Soviet Union, which was much more powerful than Russia, failed equally dismally – only it gave up after ten years

(1979-1989) instead of twenty. If China were foolish enough (which it won't be) to put boots on the ground, it would fail too. Afghanistan was never a real ally of the US, but occupied territory; its abandonment (for that is what it amounts to) says nothing about US support for its actual allies in Europe and Asia.

The West's Afghan failure, therefore, is but proof of what we should have known already: none of the great powers can change another country's way of life by force of arms alone. They can impose their model under military occupation, but they cannot durably affect how people think if they go against the trend of society itself.

If anything, abandoning Afghanistan puts the US in a stronger position to engage in great power politics, for it ends a drain on resources for what actually was but a strategic distraction. At the same time, Russia and China have to worry a lot more about potential spill-over of instability now that US and NATO troops are gone (rather than immediately reaping opportunities in what will likely remain a very volatile country).

Lessons

Nevertheless, lessons must be drawn from the Afghan debacle.

The first, and probably most important lesson, is not about *how* one could have done better, but about *whether* one should have done something in the first place. Afghanistan was indeed a strategic distraction, because once it had been taken out as a safe haven for international terrorists, no further American interests were at stake. In modern history, Afghanistan has never presented intrinsic interests to the West: to the British Empire in the 19th century, it was a buffer zone; to the US in the 20th, a theatre in which to cause nuisance for the Soviet Union.

Afghanistan is not just a failure, therefore, but, worse, a superfluous failure. The clear lesson is: do not get bogged down in a strategic distraction. In other words, intervene militarily only when your interests are directly at stake, and in as targeted a manner as possible to safeguard those interests.

Taking that into account, the Afghan experience then does also have lessons to teach about the "how" that are relevant for other theatres where the West is militarily engaged. For Europe, that notably means the Sahel. Three implications stand out.

First, the overall strategic objective must be realistic. The aim in the Sahel is not to create EU-style democratic states, but to assist in forging a social contract that may differ substantially from our own, but is acceptable to the majority of the people, in order to generate stable

States that do not pose security problems for Europe. Unfortunately, all too few local leaders have embraced this objective.

Second, without sufficient domestic support for local leadership and the *strategy* that it

pursues, *tactical* intervention cannot generate durable effect. Training and equipping the local armed forces or even directly engaging European troops in combat operations will not bring the desired end-state closer if the political as well as the military leadership of the state undermine Europe's objectives and their credibility with their own citizens and soldiers. Nobody risks his life for a government that he does not believe in. The military coup in Mali has demonstrated that the EU's influence at the political-strategic level remains all too limited.

Third, the aim is to support local efforts, not to replace them. As much as possible, an indirect approach must be pursued, training and mentoring local forces so that they can defend the state. Direct outside intervention in combat operations should be considered only when EU interests are directly at stake and there is no other option to safeguard them. That more than eight years after the initial French intervention in Mali, a French brigade still bears the brunt of the fighting, shows that in this regard too Europe's strategy for the Sahel is in need of reappraisal.

Conclusion

Describing Afghanistan as a strategic distraction may seem brutal, but it is but the strategic reality. That says nothing, of course, about the morality of sending our soldiers to be killed or wounded long after we knew that staying on would not produce any more results, and of abandoning those Afghan people who did aspire to another way of life and worked with us to that end. One can only hope that those who took the strategic decisions, in the US, Europe, and Afghanistan, will look into their hearts and learn, so that they do better in the future.

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